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ABSTRACT

There are several definitions of "learning disability," all of which involve a description of perceptual processing problems. The classic dyslexic problems are letter and word reversals by people of average or above average intelligence. Other common behaviors that may help instructors to identify dyslexic students include poor reading, inability to reproduce the alphabet, and memory dysfunction. Often, a good indicator of dyslexia is a perceived discrepancy between expected and actual student performance. Many tests are available for diagnosing and understanding learning disabilities, including the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale, the Wide Range Achievement Test, and the Malcomesius Specific Language Disability Test. Informal tests can also be devised--merely having students write the alphabet, days of the week, and months of the year can identify most dyslexic students. Though the community colleges in Ontario (Canada) have no legislative mandate to serve special needs students, a significant proportion of the students attending the colleges have learning disabilities. Providing academic modifications, such as taped textbooks and note-taking assistants, or providing remedial assistance by volunteer tutors, are just a few ways to help. More knowledge about learning disabilities and a positive attitude will prove beneficial not only to the dyslexic student, but to teachers as well. A 25-item bibliography and a modified visual/auditory/kinesthetic/tactile (VAKT) spelling lesson are included. (AJL)

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THE L.D. COLLEGE STUDENT: PROGRAM PROPOSALS

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In 1975 I encountered a student in the business program of Cambrian College. His name was George. Sometimes he would spell his name as "Jorge." At other times he would spell it as "Gorje." From time to time he even spelled it correctly. It was a mystery to me that a high school graduate was unable to spell his own name.

At about the same time I was teaching English to a law and security class. I assigned this group a "cause and effect" essay. I wrote "cause and effect" on the chalkboard and took some time to explain the meaning of the phrase. One member of the class wrote an essay about "pause and reflect." He was another mystery.

Another student whom I remember well was in the graphic arts program. He wrote a paper for me on one of his favorite topics, skiing. The paper contained many strange-looking words, such as "ngow," which I did not recognize. I could not find these words in the dictionary. I consulted with a colleague who was an avid skier. My colleague assured me that the unusual words were not a part of some specialized skiing terminology. What was the solution to this mystery?

As I was puzzling over these and other mysteries, it was my good fortune to stumble across a newspaper article on learning disabilities.

The mysteries were solved! It was an important moment of professional illumination. Since that moment I have spent thousands of hours in pursuing an understanding of the fascinating subject of learning disabilities and in working with L.D. college students. I now take it for granted that "ngow" is quite a reasonable way for a dyslexic to spell "know." He begins with a sensible phonetic attack and then gets involved in letter transposition and letter inversion.

There are many serviceable definitions of "learning disability." They all involve a description of perceptual processing problems. The classic dyslexic problems are letter and word reversals: "d" for "b," "was" for "saw." All definitions stress that dyslexics are of average or above average intelligence; this is of particular importance because many dyslexic behaviours can cause them to appear to be of less than average intelligence. It is well to remember that many great achievers, including Albert Einstein, appear to have suffered from various forms of learning disorders.

There are a thousand and one clues for the teacher to observe. Besides letter and word reversals, these behaviours are also common: poor reading (both decoding and comprehension), inability to reproduce the alphabet, memory dysfunction, poor fine motor coordination, inability to copy from the chalkboard, extremely sloppy handwriting, inappropriate use

of space when writing on a sheet of paper, an immature pencil grip, difficulties with time and direction, sequencing problems, phonetic spelling, bizarre spelling, mixed laterality, emotional lability, literalism, trouble interpreting non-verbal communication...the list is endless. Often a good indicator for the teacher is a perceived discrepancy between expected performance and actual performance (the student will frequently perform verbally at a very high level in class but will achieve at a low level on a written test. Another apparent mystery.).

There are many tests which are useful in diagnosing and understanding learning disabilities. The Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale is widely used. The Wide Range Achievement Test is also part of many test batteries. I personally find that the Malcomesius Specific Language Disability Test (Educators Publishing Service) is helpful as it is based on skills that are actually required in the classroom (eg. far point copying, visual and auditory memory). The Malcomesius is not standardized, but it is very helpful.

Many informal tests can be easily devised. I ask every student referred to me to write the alphabet, the days of the week and the months of the year. Very few dyslexics will be able to perform these tasks successfully. At the same time, people of less than average intelligence will also have

difficulty with these tasks, so it is important to get at least one reliable IQ measurement. I personally use the Test of Non-Verbal Intelligence, which can be quickly administered by anyone with a little practice (it also has the advantage of not discriminating against the dyslexic, whose main problem is verbal processing).

Whether we like it or not, we at the community colleges are in the special education business. In 1980 I screened well over a thousand postsecondary freshmen and adult training students at Cambrian College. I found that an astonishing 27% of postsecondary students and 47% of adult training students were exhibiting marked dyslexia-related behaviours. When I recently mentioned this study to an adult training teacher, her response was: "I'm sure that it's much higher than 47%."

I did an analysis of my referrals from adult training programs between September of 1986 and April of 1987. Of 22 people referred during that time period, fifteen were learning disabled, two were slow learners, four were mentally retarded, and one was brain-damaged (self-disclosure). I estimate that only about one person in ten with a problem actually is referred to me.

You can perceive here the outline of a gigantic problem. In the province of Ontario, community colleges have no legis-

lative mandate to serve the special needs student. Only very recently has the sum of three and a half million dollars been budgeted for all the special needs students at all 22 community colleges.

How, then, are we to serve these students? One way is through the use of academic modifications, which cost little or nothing in terms of money, but a great deal in terms of good will. Taped textbooks, exam readers and writers, note-taking assistants, calculators, untimed tests...these and other modifications will frequently bring success within the grasp of the dyslexic student.

We can also provide inexpensive academic remediation to dyslexics by using volunteer tutors. Many colleges have programs in child care, mental retardation counselling, social services and early childhood education. Students in these programs frequently receive training in special education. They are also often required to do volunteer work and/or field placements as part of their academic programs. Many of them make excellent tutors, I can assure you.

When you ask dyslexic students what their biggest problem is, they will usually reply "Spelling." This is not unusual because it is when they put pen to paper that they feel most vulnerable--here is where their disability is most apparent.

For this reason I have provided you with a handout of my version of a VAKT spelling program (see Appendix A). With a visual/auditory/kinesthetic/tactile approach to spelling, the various learning modalities supplement each other--strengths bolster weaknesses. The rough board referred to is simply a piece of masonite (or any other surface that gives a good deal of tactile feedback).

The dyslexic student is a challenge. His problem will often be complicated by negative emotional hangovers from earlier unpleasant school experiences. The student who needs us the most may also be the one who seems to go out of his way to alienate us. But a bit of knowledge and a positive attitude will help us to help the learning disabled student, and our rewards will be great.

When we're dealing with dyslexics, good teaching really matters.

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Appendix A

VAKT Spelling Lesson

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Spelling Lesson

In advance, put word on large index card.

Use cursive script.

Colour code errors.

1. Mini Test (words from previous lesson).

2. Show word. Have student identify word.

3. Discuss word. Eg. possible causes of errors, words within words, meaning of word, etc.

   Have a dictionary present.

4. Have student use the word, orally, in a sentence.

5. ROUGH BOARD.
   Student spells the word 4-8 times with his finger, in cursive script.

   Student holds card in his hand at this time.

   Student says the word and then spells it aloud as he writes.

6. Remove card.
   Student writes word on piece of paper. Check word. If there's an error, review immediately.

7. Oral composition of sentence using the word (in its exact form). Correct errors. When appropriate, have the student use the word as the subject or verb of his sentence.

8. Student writes sentence.
   Check sentence: note all new spelling errors, but do not correct.

9. Do only 5-8 words per session.

Give a test every 25 or 50 words. Positive reinforcement (eg. count words right, not words wrong).

At first lesson, teach student review method.
Student takes the cards (and any other materials) home after each lesson. Encourage student to keep a file of words learned and words to learn.

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